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# Topic A

## 40 Years With the Bomb

*An Interview With Henry A. Kissinger*

### 'We Were Never Close to Nuclear War'

*The former secretary of state talks to Stephen S. Rosenfeld of the editorial page staff.*

**Q:** Here it is 40 years after the bomb. What is it that statesmen, practicing politicians who have actual responsibility for power, must know about the bomb?

**A:** They of course become very conscious of the consequences of a nuclear war. One of the first things you get briefed on when you are appointed to one of the top spots is the general consequences of a nuclear war.

**Q:** Does it scare you?

**A:** It awes you. And it shows you that you have a responsibility that no previous statesman has faced, in the sense that nobody has ever had the power to destroy mankind. In the past you could always say that the consequences of defeat were worse than the consequences of war. You cannot say that with assurance in the nuclear age.

**Q:** Can awe become paralysis?

**A:** It's your duty to prevent paralysis, and yet it is also your duty to recognize that nuclear power is not the same as traditional military power. This is the dilemma. If you permit it to go to paralysis, then you're turning the world over to the most ruthless, to the one who can plausibly threaten.

So this is in the back of your mind. But it has also a contradictory result that in most concrete crises that arise you do not believe that they will turn into general war.

**Q:** What gives you that hope, that faith that a crisis won't go nuclear?

**A:** Well, partly because when you're an American, you know that you have the ultimate decision over the actions leading to nuclear war and you know that your nuclear threshold is very high, and you assume that that is equally true on the other side. But it is a curious phenomenon that in the period at least in which I was in office, I did not believe at any time that we were close to nuclear war. And I suspect this has been true throughout the nuclear age, except perhaps the Cuban missile crisis.

**Q:** Well, now we have an interview of President Nixon in *Time* magazine [July 29] where he suggests that on at least four occasions he "considered" using nuclear weapons. He's referring to the Vietnam war, to the Soviets' threatening to take out China's nuclear facilities, to the India-Pakistan war and to the Middle East crisis of 1973. "Considered," of course, can mean many different things, but what are we talking about here?

**A:** I read that interview and frankly I was sufficiently concerned to talk to some of the other key decision-makers of that period—Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Thomas Moorer, the two security advisers, Gen. [Alexander] Haig and Gen. [Brent] Scowcroft—to see whether their recollection coincided with mine. And so I can safely say that there was never a concrete occasion or crisis in which the use of nuclear weapons was considered by the government.

One has to look at the problem of decision-making at various levels. One, a president obviously has to ask himself how far he's prepared to go if absolutely the worst were to happen. In this case if the Soviets attack China or if the Soviets pressure China as a result of the India-Pakistan war or in the Middle East crisis. And I cannot speak for what President Nixon, in the privacy of his office or of his living quarters, might have considered he was prepared to do.

In terms of the operation of the government, none of these crises reached a point where there was any planning to use nuclear weapons. There was never any decision—even any contingent decision—to use nuclear weapons if such a contingency should arise. And there was never any discussion of how far we would be prepared to go in these contingencies.

So we are talking about something the president must have had in the back of his mind as to his outer limit, but not something that in a crisis the government, either with the key advisers individually or as a group, ever considered.

**Q:** In the Middle East war of 1973 there was a so-called nuclear alert on the American side. Is that not an aspect of nuclear diplomacy?

**A:** Technically it is not 100 percent correct to call it a nuclear alert. What happened was we received a message from [Leonid] Brezhnev inviting joint American-Soviet military action in Egypt in effect against the Israelis who had just trapped the 3rd Egyptian army. Brezhnev added that if we did not agree to joint action, he would undertake

unilateral action. We were determined not to undertake a joint action or to permit a unilateral Soviet action. Those of us who were meeting—and at that point President Nixon chose not to participate—were attempting to convey to the Soviets that we would oppose their move into Egypt. And we wanted to take certain actions that they would pick up through their intelligence before we sent our reply.

There are five stages of readiness for our military forces, most are in defense condition 4. In 1973, the Pacific theater, because of the legacy of the Vietnam war, was in defense condition 3. During the Middle East alert, we went from defense condition 4 to defense condition 3 for the rest of the world. Some of the consequences are that some people on leave get called back to their bases and some more bombers are put on alert and similar measures.

My guess is the high probability would have been that had the Soviets sent troops to Egypt, we would have responded with the 82nd Airborne Division in Egypt. Our ally was militarily stronger than their ally. And our judgment was that we could get more conventional forces into the area than they could.

**Q: But you would not call this a nuclear alert?**

A: It was a general alert that also alerted some nuclear forces. The best proof of that is that we did exactly the same thing in 1970 when Syria invaded Jordan and at that point the Soviet Union was not even directly involved. We wanted to generate enough cable traffic, enough alerting of forces to indicate we would do something. But we were far from a decision to go to nuclear war.

**Q: In the earlier India-Pakistan crisis it appeared at a certain point that the Soviets were encouraging the Indians to go on, having mastered East Pakistan to take West Pakistan also and to disintegrate Pakistan basically. You write in your memoirs that the United States "would not stand idly by," would render "significant assistance, the precise nature to be worked out when the circumstances arose." And you described this as "a new and ominous dimension" the Soviet encouragement of India.**

**Now this is one of the incidents where President Nixon said he "considered" nuclear weapons.**

A: We believed we had intelligence information that, after having defeated East Pakistan, the Indians would attack West Pakistan. Now, we had a special concern with Pakistan at the time because Pakistan had opened China for us and President Nixon was going to China about two months after this crisis developed. Moreover, previous presidents had made certain commitments about the territorial integrity of Pakistan.

**Q: In late November, early December 1971.**

A: But the specific events to which you referred occurred one Sunday morning early in December. President Nixon, Gen. Haig and I were meeting in his office. We received word about 10 o'clock from the Chinese—I could be off, but this is generally correct—that they had an urgent message to deliver to us at 2. We thought that the message might be that they would come to the assistance of Pakistan.

We asked Gen. Haig to receive the message and we instructed him to tell the Chinese that, if their decision was to assist Pakistan, we would not be indifferent to a Soviet attack on China. The reaction would have to be worked out in the circumstances that arose. In the event, the Chinese decided not to act. The circumstance about which we had spoken never arose.

We never inquired from the chairman of the Chiefs of Staff or from the defense secretary or from the secretary of state what they recommended we do should those circumstances arise. And so there was no planning for nuclear war.

Had there been a Soviet attack on China, it is highly probable that we would have given assistance to China. What assistance would have had to depend on staff planning that never took place. It's possible that President Nixon in his own mind was prepared to use nuclear weapons, but I think it's important to understand that, as a government, there was never any discussion of the use of nuclear weapons. Even at that meeting there was no discussion of the use of nuclear weapons.

**Q: Isn't there a sense that it's almost impossible, once you start getting into one of these very messy volatile crises, not to let come into your mind some of these "what if" questions? These ultimate nuclear**

**questions? Regardless of whether there's any planning or any documents or anything like that?**

A: It is of course true when you confront the Soviet Union, or when you even consider confronting the Soviet Union, you have to recognize that the nuclear threat increases. And, in fact, you cannot act as if you exclude the nuclear threat or, paradoxically, you encourage it.

**Q: Well, every crisis in which a great power is involved is at least implicitly nuclear and couldn't fail to be so unless a great power unilaterally disarmed.**

A: Absolutely. Diplomacy in the modern age is conducted against the backdrop of nuclear weapons. Even day-to-day diplomacy. As tension increases as specific circumstances arise that is, of course, more so. Go back to your first question. Did one consider the use of nuclear weapons? It just depends how you define "considers." If you mean in an operational sense the answer is no. If you mean in a general strategic sense, conscious of an increased danger, the answer is more ambiguous, but even in that sense we were never, in my view, close to nuclear war.

**Q: Is there a sense in which any geopolitical view of the world, by which I mean that small things done here may affect large decisions taken later in the mind or in the mind of one's adversary, is there a sense in which just a geopolitical view of the world itself adds to the nuclear element in political thinking?**

A: Well, I would argue that if you think of the world geopolitically you are, of course, more conscious of nuclear war in a crisis, and you must include it in your calculations. On the other hand, including it in your calculations in a precise way is more likely to make you act responsibly than if you approach the issue strictly moralistically or strictly legalistically because then, not being aware of your options, you may suddenly slide into a crisis in which you react convulsively. And to my mind the greatest danger of nuclear war is a crisis that develops among leaders that have not thought about these issues with precision.

**Q: But each crisis has its own pattern. Lessons from one can be very misleading. A message of resolve in one instance can be in another situation a message of intransigence.**

A: First of all, any message of resolve or conciliation will always be embedded in the general expectations about the other side that have been raised over a long period of time. And will be evaluated in that context. For example, in 1973, all the messages that went back and forth between the Soviet Union and us were in the context of a previous extensive period of détente, so that the Soviets knew we were not spoiling for a confrontation. Now had exactly the same measures been taken after a prolonged period of noncommunication or tension, it is possible that the Soviet reaction would have been different. In 1973, they pulled back less than 12

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hours after the alert. Would they do the same thing in different circumstances? I don't know. There is no cookbook recipe you can apply to every situation.

**Q: Would you say of the 1973 situation that they pulled back not because of a nuclear threat but because the United States and the U.S. ally Israel had plainly demonstrated a conventional advantage on the ground?**

A: I never thought in 1973 that the nuclear threat was the principal element of the equation. The nuclear forces were raised to the same level of alert as the other forces, but since they were closer to it to begin with I'm not even so sure that the nuclear part was as noticeable—nuclear forces being more ready than other forces by their nature.

I believe that the decisive element in 1973 was that the Israelis were conventionally superior and that our capacity to reinforce with conventional forces into Egypt was also superior to that of the Soviets.

**Q: Khrushchev said about the '62 crisis of course that there had been the smell of burning in the air. You never felt that was the case while you were in the government.**

A: Absolutely not. Certainly not vis à vis the Soviet Union. We felt it obviously with Vietnam.

**Q: I think Khrushchev meant a sense of burning to be the nuclear sense.**

A: Never even close to it.

**Q: Not in Vietnam? Not with China? Not India-Pakistan? Not Middle East?**

A: With respect to China, it was my view and it was also surely President Nixon's view, that we did not wish the Soviets to destroy China. We believed that destroying China might have the same impact on the global equilibrium as destroying Europe. We would truly have sought to resist a Soviet attack on China. But we never carried it to the point of nuclear planning.

**Q: Over all, have nuclear weapons been a help or a hindrance in the conduct of world affairs for great powers?**

A: If it were not for nuclear weapons it is likely that there would have been a war between us and the Soviets. So it is almost certainly true that nuclear weapons have preserved the peace. It is also true that if we continue the strategy that has got us these 40 years of peace, that some catastrophe somewhere along the line is going to happen and that therefore the big problem of our period is to build on this long period of peace we have a structure that is different from the preceding one.

**Q: Aren't you saying something paradoxical? You say the bomb has been an element to keep the peace over 40 years and yet if we go on as we are we risk a catastrophe. What do you mean by that?**

A: In the first 40 years, first of all there were 20 years in which we had a huge nuclear superiority, maybe even 30 years. Secondly, most of the crises were in areas where the United States and the Soviet Union controlled most of the decision-making. Finally, the weapons of the two sides only recently became very sophisticated. In the next 40 years many new centers of decision-making will emerge, and weapons will become increasingly complex. Therefore, the crises may not take such a neat evolution.

**Q: You mean . . . places, other countries which acquire nuclear weapons. Is that what you mean?**

A: Other countries which acquire nuclear weapons or other countries that can involve the nuclear powers through their alliances or their perceptions of the national interest. And if that happens then I could conceive some crisis, somewhere, that slowly evolves. . . . The danger we face is more a conflagration on the model of World War I than of World War II. Nuclear weapons make it unlikely that a superpower will deliberately aim for world conquest in one throw of the dice, but this does not exclude a gradual escalation or a creeping expansionism.